

Accepting Electronic Comments

Headquarters

Standard Operating Procedures

In an email to all Regional Administrators, Science Center Directors and HQ Office Directors, Dr. Rebecca Lent stated that starting February 2, 2004, NOAA Fisheries will start "*accepting e-mail comments on all Federal Register and NEPA documents.*"

This includes proposed and final rules, notices, permits, guidances and NEPA documents.

The purpose of this document is to define the standard operating procedures (SOPs) for HQ personnel to follow in writing a FR document, obtaining a mailbox, processing the email comments, and closing and terminating the mailbox. The SOPs implement the "Accepting Email Comments Policies" document.

Note that these procedures apply only for FR documents for which comments are analyzed at HQ.

Email Comments Mailboxes

At HQ, the policy is to establish a separate mailbox for each document accepting comments. The mailboxes will be created by the Help Desk. For each FR document that is a rule with an assigned Regulation Identifier Number (RIN), the email address will be *rin@noaa.gov* where *rin* is the RIN for the subject rule. When a RIN is not available, in the case of a non-rule document, a suitable short name for the mailbox will be used.

Language in FR Documents

Standard language to be included in the address section of rules and their supporting documents and for EISs is posted on the Email Comments Web page,

<http://home.nmfs.noaa.gov/ocioweb/projects/emailcomments/emailcomments.shtml>. For all other documents (notices, permits etc.) rule writers should develop their own language regarding accepting email comments.

Opening a Comments Mailbox

Mailboxes must be open no later than the date of the comment period opening. At least a week before filing a document with the FR, the rule writer needs to send an email to the HQ Help Desk (nmfs-HQ.Helpdesk@noaa.gov) and specify:

- Estimated opening and closing dates of the comment period
- Mailbox name (usually RIN@noaa.gov)
- Name of mailbox owner (usually rule writer)
- Fax Server number request (if required)

The Help Desk will create the mailbox within one business day and send a return email confirming that it is available. The mailbox owner shall change the initial password as soon as possible and set a "vacation message" to indicate that an email comment has been received. A suggested vacation message is:

"The National Marine Fisheries Service has received your comments and appreciates knowing your views about this action."

Comment mailboxes will have a 100MB size limit.

Monitoring Mailbox and Processing Comments

The mailbox owner needs to check the volume of mail received every day. This will ensure that any inappropriate spamming is identified and responded to as soon as possible. If you suspect spamming or if the volume of mail is nearing the 100MB limit, contact the Help Desk as soon as possible.

To prevent overloading the mail server, comments must be removed from the server after about a week after the close of the comments period. They need to be copied to a network drive, such as the g or s drives, and deleted from the mailbox. To review the comments you may print them out and process them as you would regular mailed comments. Or you may use an analysis tool such as MS Access or Excel by saving the emails as text files and loading them into the appropriate application. Printed copies of emails serve as the official administrative record.

Closing the mailbox

Mailboxes must close at or as soon as practicable after noon of the first day following the close of the comment period. Immediately after the close of the comment period, the rule writer will send an email to the Help Desk to close the mailbox to incoming mail. Mail can still be read and processed, but no new mail will be accepted. The Help desk will close mailbox and send confirmation that the mailbox has been closed.

After all the comments have been removed from the mailbox, the rule writer should send an email to Help Desk to close mailbox. The Help desk will close mailbox and send confirmation that the mailbox has been terminated.

For more information see the email Comments web page at <http://home.nmfs.noaa.gov/ocioweb/projects/emailcomments/emailcomments.shtml> or contact Jim Sargent at (301)713-2372